

The History of NCI Stone Point

The National Coastwatch Institution station at Stone Point is a satellite station of NCI Calshot Tower. It was established in May 2019, initially on a trial basis, to address concern that the western Solent was either not visible from, or very remote from, the existing NCI stations at Lee-on-the-Solent, Calshot Tower, and the Needles.

On successive Saturdays during the summer of 2018, NCI Calshot Tower were requested by HM Coastguard to assist during serious incidents in the Newtown Creek and Thorness Bay areas of the Solent. However trees and high ground on the mainland obstructs the view of those areas of the Solent from Calshot, so NCI Calshot Tower was unable to assist.

Following discussion of the problem during a visit by Coastguard trainees to the Calshot RNLI and NCI stations, the NCI Liaison Trustee (David Crozier) was contacted. A visit was arranged to Lepe Country Park and it was considered that the location would be suitable for an NCI station.

The NCI Calshot Tower station manager, Diana Roblett, and Deputy Station Manager, Roger Taylor then had a meeting with the Lepe Country Park Manager who was extremely enthusiastic. Incidents had been occurring on the water and beach which the park staff were not trained to deal with.

These various meetings and visits resulted in a proposal being submitted to the NCI Board of Trustees, and a trial NCI station at Lepe was agreed. In early 2019 NCI Calshot Tower established a Development Team for the establishment of a new satellite station.



The NCI Stone Point station in 2019



Ordnance Survey 1865 map associating "Stone Point" with the position of present day "Stansore Point".

The choice of a name for the new station posed a problem. The obvious name, "NCI Lepe", was rejected since the VHF call sign "Lepe NCI" would be too easily confused with "Lee NCI", the call sign of nearby NCI Lee-on-the-Solent. "NCI Stone Point" was chosen because the trial station would be sited close to the historic Royal Observer Corps "Stone Point" station, which dates back to Cold War days.

Unfortunately "Stone Point" is not a well defined landmark feature. Indeed, until at least the mid 1960's, Ordnance Survey maps associated the name "Stone Point" with what is nowadays known as "Stansore Point". Only on later OS maps is Stone Point shown in its present position, with Stansore Point marked some 0.8km further east. The modern

OS map usage is in agreement with the Admiralty charts and with mariner's charts, going back to the early 19th century and before, which do indeed use the name "Stansore" or "Stans Ore" Point for present day Stansore Point.

Arguments in favour of establishing an NCI station at Stone Point were many. With the exception of Hurst Spit at the western end of the Solent, Lepe Country Park occupies the closest part of the mainland to the Isle of Wight. Thus Stone Point is closer to the major yachting centre at Cowes than either NCI Calshot Tower or NCI Lee-on-the-Solent.

Whilst most weekend yacht racing takes place further east in the central Solent, major yachting events such as Cowes Week and the Fastnet race pass Lepe as they traverse the western Solent. On such days large and fast racing yachts intermingle with many smaller yachts, as well as with motor cruisers, wind surfers, paddle boards and kayaks. During the Round the Island race well over a thousand yachts and other boats go past Lepe.



Looking west from Lepe during Cowes Week, 2019. The pile is at the entrance to Beaulieu River.

From Stone Point there is a good view of numerous areas of concern in the western Solent such as the infamous Gurnard Ledge (about 1.7nm distant), as well as Quarry (2nm), Saltmead (3nm), and Hamstead ledges (4.5nm); all off the Isle of Wight coast.

On the mainland coast the entrance to Beaulieu River, with the continually shifting Beaulieu Spit, is adjacent to Lepe Park. Sometimes known as "Horseshoe Spit", Lepe Spit is situated between Stone Point and Stansore Point and extends over 0.5 km from the Lepe Park shoreline. It is poorly defined by the Admiralty Charts and regularly sees yachts aground, often because they are sailing inshore to dodge the current.



Yacht aground at the end of Lepe Spit

The beach at Lepe is the only publicly accessible sandy beach on the mainland shore of the western Solent. The Country Park and its beaches become very busy on summer weekends with many people swimming and wading in the water. Unfortunately the proximity of the Isle of Wight results in very strong currents between Gurnard and Lepe. An ebbing spring tide can cause 3 to 4 knots of current

sweeping close to the shore at both Stansore Point and Lepe Spit. Wading on Lepe Spit can be particularly dangerous since the spit is steep sided on the western, downstream edge. People take little heed of the warning notices and appear oblivious to the often very obvious current. Young children paddling off the spit are particularly at danger since they can easily be swept out of their depth.



The strong ebb tide current at Stansore Point



The strong current over Lepe Spit is often obvious.

When running against a strong south-westerly wind, the ebbing tide can result in large waves in the vicinity of the Lepe Spit Cardinal Mark. These are exploited by skilled kite surfers, wind surfers, and kayakers who launch from Lepe Beach; but these rough conditions pose a potential hazard for the less skilled.

Thus establishing NCI Stone Point potentially could make a significant contribution to the safety of recreational boating in the western Solent, and to beach based activities in and near Lepe Country Park.

By May 2019 an NCI transportable station unit had become available, having previously been used by NCI Cromer, and before that Aberystwyth. On 11th May the NCI Calshot Tower team watched as a flatbed lorry lowered the unit into place using its Hiab crane.

Basic watchkeeping equipment was installed and mains electricity connected. First watches commenced on the 25th May 2019 in time for the D-Day 75th year commemorations in Lepe Park on the 1st June.

Using watchkeepers from NCI Calshot Tower (and therefore trained to DFS standard), the station was initially opened at weekends, Bank Holidays, and during Cowes Week (11th to 18th August 2019). Because the station keys were held by the Country Park office, the station opening hours had to be limited to 10am to 4pm. On opening and closing, the watchkeepers signed on and off with HM Coastguard at the National Maritime Operations Centre (NMOC), and with the home station at NCI Calshot Tower.

NCI Stone Point rapidly showed its worth. In the first seven months there were 6 incidents involving HM Coastguard of which 4 incidents required a lifeboat. Two of



May 2019: the trial station was opened with very basic watchkeeping equipment.



Dismasted yacht monitored from Stone Point during Cowes Week 2019

the incidents were instigated by the Coastguard calling the station. One such tasking, received via VHF channel 0, was to con a Lifeboat to a yacht aground on Lepe Spit. In another incident the station was tasked to monitor the progress of a dismasted yacht and advise if a lifeboat might be required. This was due to the loss of Coastguard communications with the casualty. Both demonstrated that the Coastguard had confidence in the new Station.

In contrast to Calshot Tower, watchkeepers at Stone Point soon found themselves interacting with the public. Weather permitting, NCI and RNLI information and safety leaflets were made available on a table outside the station. Local kayakers and canoe party leaders launching from the car park below the station started to pass their contact details and plans for the day. People asked at the station for information about the park, beach, and the Solent.

Interaction with the public was further increased by “Beach Patrols”. These were instigated because the location of the trial station did not provide a view of the areas of concern at Lepe Spit and Stansore Point. The station site had been determined by the need to provide a mains power connection at economical cost. The chosen site allowed the Park’s “family beach”, the western Solent, and the Beaulieu River entrance to be viewed. However viewing areas further east required one watchkeeper to leave the station on Beach Patrol, contact being maintained using UHF radios.



The initial Stone Point station location above the Beach Car Park.

The Beach Patrols allowed observation of kayakers, and of wind and kite surfers exploiting the rough water in the tide race off Lepe Spit. On patrol it was also possible to provide information, for example, about areas where swimming or paddling was inadvisable due to strong currents close to the shore, and of the dangers posed by using inflatable toys and boats if the wind was blowing offshore.



A wind surfer and a small yacht in the rough water over Lepe Spit

During 2019 the NCI station and the patrolling watchkeepers were well received by park users, and NCI Stone Point had proved itself a valuable SAR asset to HM Coastguard. Thus the trial was deemed successful and, in February

2020, the NCI Calshot Tower committee proposed to the NCI Board of Trustees that NCI Stone Point be continued into the future and that the current trailer be replaced with a more suitable transportable unit. Lepe Country Park strongly supported the proposal and offered a new site about 40m further east which would allow continuous observation of Lepe Spit.

Unfortunately the covid-19 pandemic then struck, and further development of the new station became disrupted. Along with all other NCI stations, NCI Stone Point closed from 19th March 2020, not reopening until the weekend of 6th June.

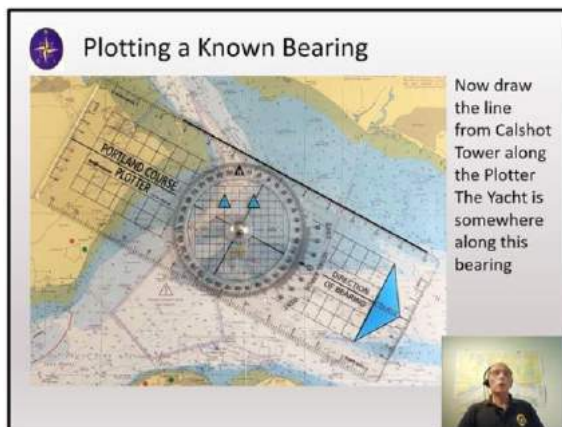
With the station reopened it was apparent that the restrictions on foreign travel due to covid-19 were resulting in many more people visiting UK beaches. Although recreational boating had decreased due to the closure of marinas, beach goers were venturing onto the water on paddle boards, inflatable canoes, and similar craft, often for the first time and without any training. In response to the increased activity, it was decided to staff NCI Stone Point from Friday through Monday inclusive.



The loss of foreign holidays due to the covid-19 pandemic often resulted in a busy beach at Lepe during summer 2020.

Various Covid-19 precautions were necessary: only one watchkeeper would be in the station with the other on Beach Patrol, or in their car parked close to the station, and the UHF radios used to maintain contact. Within the station sanitising products and personal protective equipment were provided. The area between the NCI station and the fence around the historic ROC Observation post was taped off to discourage the public from approaching close to the station.

The new station had resulted in a significant and very welcome increase in the number of people applying to become trainee watchkeepers. However covid-19 precautions prohibited holding the classroom based training sessions which previously would have been the norm.



Still frame from one of the training videos recorded by Training Officer Peter Brown

Instead, NCI Calshot Tower Training Officer Peter Brown recorded a series of videos for trainees to view at home. From mid-September 2020 these were supplemented by one-to-one training sessions at Stone Point on Tuesday to Thursday mornings and these continued into November.

However with many established watchkeepers self-isolating, and most new recruits still to qualify, it was a struggle to staff NCI Stone Point at weekends during winter 2020/21. On several occasions the station had to be single manned with the watchkeeper routinely contacting Calshot Tower for safety checks.

The staffing situation started to improve from February 2021 onwards as watchkeepers become vaccinated against covid-19. From 6th May 2021, in anticipation of another busy summer on UK beaches, the decision was made to attempt to staff NCI Stone Point on 7 days a week. At first only the morning watch was well covered but, with the help of many training sessions for new recruits, and with the newly qualifying watchkeepers, from mid-August the station was consistently staffed for both morning and afternoon watches.

In contrast to 2020, recreational boating and yacht racing was taking place in 2021 although racing during Cowes Week was hampered by poor weather. To relieve the pressure on HMCG, Solent Coastguard started asking mariners to call local NCI stations for radio checks. This resulted in a significant increase in radio traffic on channel 65 and improved awareness of the location and role of NCI stations.

Despite NCI Stone Point only being fully open during the latter part of 2021, there were 15 incidents during the year including one very serious event on the 28th August (NCI day) during which two lifeboats and the Coastguard helicopter had been deployed. There had also been many other “recordable events” where a potentially hazardous situation had been monitored but had resolved itself without the need for SAR assets. The year’s activity served to emphasise the need to establish a more permanent station at Stone Point.

During summer 2021 progress towards designing and commissioning a new station to replace the NCI trailer unit was proving frustratingly slow. The design needed to satisfy strict New Forest National Park Authority guidelines including being fully movable, as opposed to a permanent building. Rapidly increasing costs for construction materials, disrupted supply chains, and uncertain manpower availability due to covid-19 meant that many firms were unwilling to give quotations. Quotations which were received had short validity periods such that they expired before approval from the NCI Board of Trustees and other authorities could be obtained.

Eventually a local firm, Kingston Building Solutions, was selected and on the 13th October 2021, the proposal was accepted by the NCI Board of Trustees and a deposit paid with delivery promised for spring 2022. Following the approval for the new build, the Station reached out to the local community, businesses and organisations to help with funding. The generosity of the support offered demonstrated just how much the users of the Country Park and the Solent area appreciated the service that NCI Stone Point provides.

The new station was delivered on 5th April 2022 and, after fitting out and connection to the electricity supply, watches started in the new station on the 9th July. The new site lives an improved view of Lepe Spit and the central Solent while still allowing observation of the western Solent.



The new NCI Stone Point station arrives, is fitted out, and brought into use

(July 2022)